

Chapter IV

God Became Man

Who was conceived by the Holy Ghost, born
of the Virgin Mary.

When the time had fully come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, ... so that we might receive adoption as sons. And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, "Abba! Father!" So through God you are no longer a slave but a son, and if a son then an heir. (Gal. 4:4-7.)

If we today in the midst of a time of world struggle wish to celebrate Christmas properly, then two things dare not happen. First, we dare not let the joy of Christmas be corrupted by thoughts about the horrors of the present time and by anxiety about the still greater ones that may yet come. Then the devil would have gained what he wants. With a Christianity that has no more joy in its heart he has an easy game. The only thing that he really fears are men who carry the real joy of Christmas in their hearts. For against them he is powerless. All evil thrives only in joylessness. When the evil enemy attacks a man who can truly sing out from his heart:

*The Sun that laughs at me
Is my Lord Jesus Christ;
What makes me sing
Is what is in heaven,*

then that enemy stands before a fortress against which all his weapons can do nothing. He has to surrender in despair. That is why his tactic always is that he first tries to rob us of this joy. The second thing, however, is just as important: that we are not sucked into an artificial Christmas joy, that so-called Christmas joy which is gone two days after Christmas, which lasts about as long as the candles we burn on the Christmas tree. "One must now forget what kind of evil

time it is; it should at least be Christmas today.” This Christmas joy belongs in the category “means of intoxication, narcotic.” It produces only illusion and disappointment, and leaves the soul empty and weak. Against it the old evil enemy has nothing at all to protest. On the contrary, to him it is all right, for he loves everything that is illusion; all that plays into his hand.

No, dear friends, we wish to have, if I may so express it, a solid Christmas joy, not just a little candlelight with a Christmas-tree fragrance, but a storm lantern that does not go out even when it is blown upon from all sides. And that is why I have chosen for today a text that has nothing at all to do with the poetry of Christmas but is one of the most powerful words of the entire Holy Scriptures because it, as it were, expresses the Christmas joy in the whole context of the message of salvation. That I would like to try to show you with God’s help. May he who gave this word to the apostle also make it so sink into our hearts that it will stand fast, invincible, not to be brought down, a truly mighty fortress that is able to ward off all attacks.

“When the time had fully come ...” How remarkable that still sounds! Time that had fully come! How altogether differently we speak of time! Every man speaks today of an evil time. One would like to be away from it, either back in a more beautiful past or far away in a happier future. It is only the time that is now which one does not like to live through. That is quite humanly understandable, just as a sick person yearns for days when he was well or when he will again be well. This is now the time of humanity’s sickness: the body is running a fever and is in pain; it tosses and turns in the dreadful events of the present. But how did we do before with time? Was the time before a time that had fully come? Why, then, these efforts to pass away the time, to forget the lost time, the elapsed time? Why was it and why is it still that so many men complain they have no time? Think once a little about what a role the “too late” or “too early” has played in your life, or about why it is that the memory of the past is so sad. Time passes and with it our expectations and hopes, unfulfilled, just as buds fall from the trees without having become fruit. Just that seems to be the nature of time, which we all know: that it has not fully come but—just passes away. And now there it sounds like a tone from another world into our world: “When the time had fully come ...”

Yes, from another world, and yet it means that from our world and from our world time. It was not at all a particularly good time about

which the apostle speaks. Had one then said to some Jew, “You, the time has now fully come,” he would have looked at him as one looks at a crazy man. What has fully come? Nothing has fully come. The world is full of suffering, anxiety, injustice, death, and sorrow. Because in an obscure corner of the Roman Empire a little child has come into the world—therefore has the time fully come? Are we Jews not the prey of Roman imperialism? Do the nations not groan under the yoke of Roman dictatorship? Do the Roman officials not plunder our land? And if we were to meet this Jew again thirty years later, would he not scornfully call to us: “And now where are you with your time that has fully come? Yesterday he was crucified by the Roman governor, your fulfiller of time, and now things go on the same old miserable way.” And since then nineteen hundred years has flown by, with numerous wars; the world empire of Rome has broken up; others have come and gone. Millions of men have been born and have died. What do you want with your absurd “when the time had fully come”? Time passes away—that is all.

And yet it is true: when the time had fully come, God sent his Son. We cannot see that the time had fully come. But above time God sits on his throne in his eternity and looks upon the world and its time, just as a doctor sits at the bed of a sick person who lies there in fever and knows nothing of the doctor. But the doctor listens carefully to his breathing and takes his pulse and then at a particular moment stands up and calls his nurse and says, “Now is the time; now we shall operate.” And then he performs the saving act. We do not know the time when it is time for God; we are the sick person, not the physician. But God knows the time, our time, which is his time. Time for him to act, to save. When the time had fully come, God sent his Son.

That is why we celebrate Christmas. For we know: at that time the saving act took place. Just why at that time, we do not really understand. But we know what God has done at that time for us, a humanity sick unto death. He has saved us. And the act by which he has done it is the coming of him whom the Bible calls the Son of God. That is, as everything that we say about God, a parable. God has no sons just as men have sons. But this parable expresses a truth that we can never completely grasp. It says: Jesus is he who comes forth from the heart and mystery of God, yes, who is God himself upon earth, without God having ceased to be in his eternity; he, in whom God himself is with us and wills to be with us, and in whom he himself speaks to us and deals with us; he in whom God himself encounters

us and opens his heart, he through whom God has established the relation with himself.

As a true man, he was among us, one of us. That Paul wants to say with the words “born of woman, born under the law.” Both are expressions that designate man as a creature, as an ordinary man. That is what can be said of every man and must be said: he is born of woman and born under the law. The apostle does not speak of a virgin either here or anywhere else. He does not want to emphasize what distinguishes Jesus from us, but rather, what makes him like us: birth and law. He was once a little struggling child in swaddling clothes. And he had to learn, had to listen, had to go to school to learn to read and write; had to learn, as every other little Jewish boy, to read the Bible—the Old Testament. He was reared in the custom and religion of his father, perhaps also in his father’s vocation as a carpenter. His mother taught him to pray, and he prayed his whole life long. His last word, “My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?” was a prayer. He died, as every man must die, and was buried. He was a man. Thus God wanted to have it; as man, God wanted to come to us men; otherwise he would not really come to us at all. Only a man can we really understand. We do not understand what is less than a man, and we do not understand what is more than a man. But God wanted to be wholly understandable to us, and near. Thus he came as man to us.

But now this “under the law” has still another far-reaching meaning. By law Paul means in Galatians the curse that weighs upon human life on account of its godlessness. Into this curse Jesus came, just as a son comes into the business debts of his father. He himself did not indeed incur the debts, but the debts that men have incurred crush him to death. He came into it, and the curse that lies upon the whole human race on account of its godlessness destroys him. For that reason he had come. He, the innocent one, wanted and had to be destroyed by an evil human inheritance.

See, that belongs to the message of Christmas! There is no Christmas without Good Friday; we will also see that there is no Good Friday without Easter and Whitsunday. That is the most powerful thing about this Christmas text, that it unites Christmas with Good Friday, Easter, and Whitsunday. The incarnation of the Savior is first completed on the cross. For there for the first time it is completely true: he took us upon himself in order to give himself.